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An interesting article on Soviet perceptions of Central America and the problems of a negotiated agreement.

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Interpretation Gap on Contadora

U.S., Soviet Ambiguities Block Solutions for Their Clients

By SUSAN KAUFMAN PURCELL

Throughout the debate over Central America, the Soviet Union has loomed as, at the very least, a shadow-player. It is assumed that the Soviets' support of Nicaragua gives them an interest in whether, and how, the Sandinista government survives. Yet little attention has been given in this country to the Soviets' position on, and eventual acceptance or discrediting of, a regional peace settlement through the Contadora process. A comparison with the U.S. position is instructive.

The Soviet Union supports a negotiated settlement in Nicaragua that is based on the Contadora process. So does the United States. Yet both are miles apart in their interpretation of Contadora's 21-point statement of principles.

This conclusion emerged from recent talks in Moscow between U.S. delegates on the U.S.-Soviet Dartmouth Conference Task Force on Regional Conflict and members of the Soviet Union's Latin American, North American and economics institutes, plus high-ranking officials on the Central Committee and in the Foreign Ministry.

The basic disagreement centers on the meaning of concepts that the U.S. government considers a key to an acceptable negotiated settlement of the conflicts in Nicaragua and El Salvador. These include non-intervention, internal reconciliation and democratization.

For the United States, non-intervention involves an end to the "export of revolution" by Marxist regimes in general, and the Sandinista government in particular. An acceptable settlement would have to prohibit Nicaragua, Cuba or other Marxist governments from fomenting or supporting "national liberation movements" aimed at overthrowing incumbent governments in the region and installing "progressive" governments aligned with Cuba and the Soviet Union.

But Soviet officials with whom we spoke argued that Nicaraguan or Cuban support for national-liberation movements did not constitute intervention, because such movements are created by "underlying social and economic conditions." If the Soviet Union and Cuba get involved, it is because they are forced to by U.S. support for counterrevolutionary movements. Soviet and Cuban behavior is "defensive" in nature, they say; it is a response to a request for assistance, and therefore cannot be regarded as intervention.

In contrast, the Soviets argue, U.S. support of groups attempting to remove the Sandinista government *does* constitute intervention. This is because "progressive" regimes "enjoy the support of their people" (while "non-progressive" regimes, such as the Duarte government in El Salvador, do not). Even if U.S. support is in response to a request for assistance, it constitutes intervention because "counterrevolutionary" movements are, by definition, "counter-progressive," and thus not legitimate.

The Soviets therefore regard the Nicaraguan rebels as mercenaries, a force created by outsiders. There are 15,000 Nicaraguan rebels in a total population of 3 million, compared with 10,000 Salvadoran rebels in a population of 5 million. Acknowledging that Sandinista mistakes probably had caused some Nicaraguans to join the rebels, the Soviets argued that without U.S. "intervention" the rebellion would cease to exist. However, they regard outside support as inconsequential for the Salvadoran rebels' survival.

The Soviets' notion of "internal reconciliation" was also very different from U.S. government views. For the United States, internal reconciliation refers to a process that includes talks between the incumbent government and both armed and unarmed opposition movements, leading ultimately to the incorporation of the rebels into the political process. The Soviets agree that this, and more, should occur in El Salvador, but will have none of it for Nicaragua.

According to the Soviets, internal reconciliation in Nicaragua refers only to the unarmed internal opposition (in fact, such talks are already occurring). There can be no talks between the rebels and the Sandinista government, the Soviets say, because the former are "traitors" who oppose a legitimate government "elected by the people."

In El Salvador, in contrast, the Soviets support talks between the rebels and the Duarte government, even though the Salvadoran rebels, like the Nicaraguan rebels, are armed and are fighting for the overthrow of an elected government.

Why the double standard? For the Soviets, there is no inconsistency. Unlike the Sandinista government, the Duarte government is illegitimate, the Soviets say. Its election did not reflect the will of the people but the will of the United States. The armed opposition, because it reflects underlying social and economic forces, is legitimate. The Duarte government, therefore, should not only talk with it but also share power with it.

Differences also exist between the U.S. and the Soviet governments as to democracy and its implementation. The U.S. government considers the Sandinista regime a Marxist dictatorship. Freedom of the press, religion and association are suppressed, and there is no separation between the army and the Sandinista governing party. Nicaragua's last elections, which were held in this political climate and which excluded major opposition leaders from participating, are therefore illegitimate in the U.S. view. Any negotiated settlement in accordance with the Contadora principles must include provisions for the full guarantees of democratic processes in Nicaragua.

The Soviets disagree. "President Reagan says that he wants to destroy the communist regime in Nicaragua," a high-ranking Soviet official said, "but in no way can the regime be called communist." Instead, another argued, "Nicaragua has its own concept of democracy." He said that Reagan's call for new elections misreads the situation. "Impartial observers" in the last election "all said that democratic procedures were followed." Opposition leaders were not *prevented* from participating—they *chose* not to do so, the Soviets say. They believe, therefore, that a Contadora settlement that includes support for the principles of democratization and political pluralism would not require significant changes in Nicaragua's political system.

The fact that the Soviet and the U.S. governments both publicly proclaim their support for a negotiated settlement in Central America based on Contadora's 21 points is therefore cause for neither optimism nor complacency. There is agreement on the words, but not on their meaning. Since the superpowers and their allies would be expected to honor the treaty, its ambiguities must be clarified. Otherwise, it will not be worth the paper that it's printed on.

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